

Continuity and Change in Saudi Arabia's Leadership Transition

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Just before the New Year, King Abdullah was admitted to a hospital with breathing difficulties later attributed to [pneumonia](#). In the weeks that followed, officials half-heartedly attempted to reassure the world of Abdullah's improvement, but on January 23 came the [news](#) that many suspected as imminent - King Abdullah had passed away and his half-brother, Crown Prince Salman, had become king.

International scrutiny of Salman began immediately, with comparisons between him and Abdullah and predictions regarding his policy priorities flooding the Internet. From the abundance of reports emerged the certainty that, above all, continuity will be a central theme of his rule. The new monarch quickly pledged to continue King Abdullah's main domestic and foreign policies. The nearly unchanged composition of the [cabinet of ministers](#) supported the idea of continuity with fears that sharp policy changes could cause instability in Saudi Arabia which currently faces severe economic and political risks.

These risks mean that security and stability will remain a top priority. Saudi Arabia faces regional threats from ISIS attacks in the north, Yemeni implosion in the south, and Bahraini domestic unrest in the east. Additionally, internal instability stemming from both [disenfranchised Shi'a communities](#) and [ISIS supporters](#) pose significant challenges. King Salaman's challenges are compounded by a now slightly more urgent need to create an acceptable succession plan as the leadership transition from [Ibn Saud's sons to grandsons](#) comes one step closer. As former defence minister, Salman is expected to prioritise security and stability, at least in the immediate future.

This impacts the domestic agenda, particularly with regards to Abdullah's limited reform programme. King Salman is rumoured to be more conservative than his ['reformist'](#) predecessor. While it is unlikely he will spend time repealing the limited reforms Abdullah managed to pass, he will also not spend time trying to build the

political capacity to expand them. Women's rights and political dissension will continue to be sharply suppressed, while less contentious healthcare and education reforms will proceed.

Throughout their discussion on the continuity of policies and importance of security, Saudi leaders have failed to address one important issue: the Kingdom's relationship with Iran. Many argue that this toxic rivalry is responsible for initiating or prolonging conflicts throughout the Middle East, including in [Syria](#), [Bahrain](#), and [Yemen](#). Relations with Iran remained poor during King Abdullah's rule, and the P5+1 nuclear programme negotiations have exacerbated tensions as Saudi Arabia fears loss of influence should Western relations with Iran improve. Saudi Arabia has long feared the possibility of Iran developing nuclear capabilities, and King Abdullah clearly stated that Saudi Arabia would not hesitate to [develop a nuclear weapon](#) if Iran appeared to be doing the same. So will King Salman pledge continuity in his country's hostile attitude towards Iran? Or will he try to change policy and pursue better bilateral relations?

A leadership transition always presents an opportunity to restart political relationships. It was the election of 'moderate' Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and the acceptance of the result by Ayatollah Khamenei, that helped create the political space for recent nuclear negotiations with the West. Pursuing better relations with Iran, practically speaking, could alleviate many of the security issues that worry Saudi leaders. Despite important differences between the two countries, they share several core foreign policy goals, including defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria, expelling al Qaeda from Yemen, and supporting Palestinians in their conflict with Israel.

These are issues the two countries could conceivably work together on to build some level of trust and cooperation. There is no reason why this is impossible; Saudi Arabia has willingly, if not openly, cooperated with [Israel](#) when doing so was beneficial. Such pragmatism in foreign policy could surely extend to Iran, if political leaders were so inclined.

In his first [public address](#) as king, Salman said, 'The Arab and the Islamic nations are in dire need for solidarity and cohesion.' Perhaps he also realises the possibility of Saudi Arabia and Iran cooperating to tackle some of the biggest security dilemmas facing their region. It is too soon to predict whether Salman will choose the path of continuity or change regarding Iran. His reportedly poor health and potential power struggles within the Saudi royal family could limit his ability to enact such change, even if he was so inclined. But such a change could have positive security ramifications for Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the broader Middle East region.

Update: King Salman appears to be asserting his authority with a [major cabinet reshuffle](#). Whether this results in a change in overall policy remains to be seen.